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ABSTRACT

This document presents an interview with Pam Martell, who coordinates educational services to Michigan's approximately 60,000 Native Americans. Since over 98 percent of Michigan's American Indian children attend public schools, Martell places a high priority on the quality of public education. Equally important is working on issues concerning student retention, policy development, negotiating pro-Indian legislation, community networking, implementing teacher inservices, attending Indian events, and organizing a summer youth camp. Martell, who is also Native American, believes that in order to improve education for American Indians, teachers must implement practices that consider children's differing cultural and learning backgrounds. Teachers must also become aware of their own biases and stereotypes regarding Native Americans. To avoid stereotyping, Martell recommends teaching children about Native Americans in a developmentally appropriate sequence by exposing young students to Native Americans and their culture in a contemporary context. In later years, as students develop an understanding of the ideas associated with time, they may be taught history and experiences of Native American people and their culture. Martell provides information on several resources available to help educators select authentic and accurate materials portraying Native Americans. Martell believes that educators need to include Native American materials, resources, and information in many areas of the curriculum, rather than isolating the study of Native Americans to a seasonal unit. Contains seven references. (Author/LP)

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A Matter of Respect:

An Interview with Pam Martell, Coordinator of Indian Education, Michigan Department of Education

April 1, 1993
(updated Sept. 7, 1993)

by Melissa Heckard, MSLIS

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Abstract

In April, 1993, the author interviewed Pam Martell, Coordinator of Indian Education for the State of Michigan. Martell answered questions about the nature of her work, the community that she serves, goals for improving education for Native Americans, and appropriate resources for teaching about Indians. Martell's job is to coordinate educational services to Michigan's approximately 60,000 Native Americans. Although under the direction of the Department of Education, Martell sets her priorities according to the needs of the Native community, receiving guidance from tribal centers, parent groups, and students. Since over 98% of the Michigan's American Indian children attend public schools, quality of public education is one of Martell's main concerns. In order to improve education for Native youth, teachers should implement practices proven through research to be effective for a broad range of children. Teachers must also become aware of their own biases regarding Indians. Martell recommends teaching children about Native Americans in a developmentally appropriate sequence. She stresses the importance of using literature that portrays contemporary Native people with young children. Many excellent resources are available to help educators select authentic and accurate materials portraying Native Americans.

Introduction

Pamela Martell's office is a tiny cubicle within a maze of similar spaces, deep in the midst of Michigan's Department of Education. But her workspace is not confined to a cramped, paper-laden desk. As the State's Coordinator of Indian Education, Martell is constantly on the move to meet the needs of Michigan's diverse Indian population, currently estimated to be over 60,000 persons. Martell's job is to coordinate educational services for Native Americans attending Michigan schools, but her mission is to serve the entire Indian population, as she puts it, "ages birth through death."

Martell's mission stems from her philosophy that the problems confronting any child in the education system cannot be divorced from the child's place in a larger context - as part of a family, a community, and a culture. Despite limited funding and support staff, Martell attends to as many levels of outreach as possible. Her activities include policy development, negotiating pro-Indian legislation, networking within and outside of the State government, inservicing educators, attending Indian events, organizing a summer youth camp, and personally answering calls which come frequently from Indian students throughout the state.

Martell previously worked as an early childhood education director and a fifth grade teacher. She holds an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education and a masters degree in Curriculum Development, both from Michigan State

University. At present she is working on a doctorate degree in Teacher Training, also at Michigan State. Her goal is to train classroom teachers who will be more sensitive to culturally diverse students. In addition to being a more than full time employee and student, Martell is the "full-time mom" of a teenage daughter with whom she shares a close relationship.

On April 1, 1993, Martell answered the following questions during an interview conducted for the purposes of the interviewer's course assignment in Literature for Adolescents. The course was required as part of the interviewer's Master of Science in Library and Information Science degree, offered through Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

Q: When did the State initiate an Indian Education Program and how long have you served as Coordinator?

A: The Office of Indian Education was established in response to a study that was presented to the State Board of Education in the early 1970's, which indicated the adverse educational and socio-economic conditions of Native Americans in Michigan. The unit was meant to be quite an extensive advocacy effort, one with a full staff to help deal with the broad range of issues raised by the study. Because of funding cuts over the years, the staff has dwindled down to me and a half-time secretary, which was the situation when I began this job.

I am the second Indian Education Coordinator and have been in this position for four years. Les Gemmill preceded me as Coordinator for eighteen years. I worked in a complement program with Les for a number of those years, so in some ways I was prepared for this job before I began.

Q: What additional life or work experience prepared you for this job?

A: Since my heritage is Turtle Mountain Chippewa and Crow, I have a personal understanding of what it means to be a Native American. And since Michigan's Indian community is very diverse, representing hundreds of tribes in the Detroit area alone, my mixed ancestry has been an advantage for working with different groups. Also, I don't have any tribal political ties in Michgan, so I'm not perceived as an advocate for one tribal community more than another.

Upon graduating from Michigan State University in 1978, I was recruited by the Indian community to work in a newly funded project called "A Bridge Between Two Worlds." I've worked as as a curriculum coordinator for Sault Ste. Marie's preschool programs and as the executive director of the Petoskey Indian Center. Prior to beginning as Coordinator, I took a five year break from Indian politics, working as an elementary school teacher and as the Director of Early Childhood Education for Lansing Public Schools.

The greatest life experience preparing me for this position has come through my experience as a mother, sister,

and aunt. Parenting and supporting my daughter and family through the various traumas they each have experienced in the public school setting has been the greatest challenge to my educational training.

Q: What is the State's expectation of you as Indian Education Coordinator?

A: I wish it was so clearly defined! The Department has taken the stand that I am the person who is responsible for all issues pertaining to Natives and all issues relative to Natives that come into it. Since I've been given a very autonomous position, every year I write out my strategies, my key areas that I want to work on. Retention, community networking, and teacher inservicing are three main issues that I deal with, retention being the most extensive. An estimated 50% of Michigan's Native American students are not graduating from high school. Consequently, only 6% of Michigan's Native American adults have four or more years of college education.

During my first year as Coordinator, I began the process of writing a formal plan in order to refresh myself with Native American issues and to update myself on the status of things. I found that, sad to say, not much had changed during my five year break from Indian politics. All of those things that I work on now are from what the community has told me to work on.

I'm more accountable to the Native American community in Michigan - i.e. the Indian education program directors, the tribal education directors, the tribal chairmen, the Commission on Indian Affairs, the urban organizations, the historic tribes, and students - than to the Department alone. My agenda is set by them and changes, sometimes hourly, based on issues that become current priorities, although all of it still circulates around the issues of retention, community relationships, and teacher sensitivity.

Q: With so many responsibilities, what are your priorities?

A: Because I'm also expected by the Department to serve internally, I'm called to sit on a number of councils, steering committees, and boards regarding any legislation, any policy, any programming, any services, or any inservices, etc., that require Native American representation. The job is monumental!

I think the most effective thing for me to do in this role is to concentrate on policy issues, because somebody has to represent policy issues and how they trickle down. But I also deliver direct services to students, which keeps me on target with what the students are saying are the most important issues.

In the summer I run a summer youth program, the Michigan Indian Youth Retreat. Students also call me into the field. I work with Native youth groups on college campuses and am asked to participate in forums and discussions. Recently a

Native students organization called me in to speak at a sensitivity training workshop for their school staff.

Whenever students call, I go! And when I can't go because of budget or time constraints, I consult with them by phone. I get a lot of calls from students. I'm as accessible as I can be, but what's frustrating is that there needs to be a lot more people available to work with our youth on the state, local, school, family, and invidivual levels.

Q: What is the Michigan Indian Youth Retreat?

A: The Michigan Indian Youth Retreat was a dream that I brought with me when I came into this job. Its purpose is to give Native American youth an opportunity to learn about and identify with their ancestry, improve study skills, explore leadership, and develop personal responsibility. We offer two sessions, one for sixth through eighth graders and another for high school students, serving over 200 young people each summer.

I co-coordinate the program with Eva Kennedy, Coordinator of the College Partnerships Program at Michigan State University. I have no State moneys, no budget item for this, so I spend the year identifying funds, pulling the program together, and looking for co-sponsors. In 1993 our co-sponsors were Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. They paid the room and board, which is the biggest expense.

Q: You mentioned a reduced staff as one consequence of budget cuts. How else have you been affected?

A: Because of budget cuts, I now only have $1,000 in travel to do this entire state for a year, which means that people are having to reimburse me for travel in order for me to do my job. Four years ago I started out with $10,000 per year, which is a more reasonable amount for travel to start meeting the needs of Michigan Indians.

I go out of state only once a year on my own budget, to the National Indian Education Conference. The rest of my out of state travel is paid by the boards on which I'm serving. I use some pretty creative ways to help allow for more travel than my budget alone covers.

Q: How many K-12 students do you serve, and in what school setting are they present in the greatest numbers?

A: When I need the figures, I look at whatever the State count is for K-12 programs each year.[1] We represent 1% of the total school population. But we have some school districts that are 48% Native American. I serve an elementary school that is 70% Native American. The highest concentration is in Wayne County, where we know we have a minimum of 12,000 Native Americans.

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[1] According to the Michigan Department of Education, the total K-12 public school enrollment in 1993-94 was 1,517,924. The total Native American enrollment was 15,321, with twenty-three schools not reporting.

People don't often realize that 54% of Michigan's Indians live in urban areas, and that 98.8% of us are in public schools. In fact, we have only one tribal school in Michigan, Nah Tah Wash - Soaring Eagle in Hannahville.[2] Nationally 90% of Native Americans are educated in public schools. People think of the education issues for Natives as being tribal school issues, and they're not, not when our kids are in public schools the way they are.

The big question that I'm working on in my doctoral research is the experience of Native Americans in Michigan's public schools. The goals that Native American parents have for their children could be achieved by involving local Native American communities in the efforts of local school districts to meet the needs of all students, as the schools work to implement Michigan's Public Act 25, the "Quality Package" legislation. Because I believe so strongly that Native American education is a national *public* schools issue, I'm also working with a coalition of other state directors on federal legislation to start pushing states for accountability in public education for Native students.

Q: What are the education issues according to Native American youth?

A: When I ask students what the key issues are in schools, they describe schools as lacking respect for them. Now

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[2] A second tribal elementary school, Bahweting Anishnabe, opened in Sault St. Marie, Michigan, in 1993.

"respect" sounds like a great big word, and since I never accept labels I ask the better than 300 kids I meet each year at schools, Indian gatherings, and the summer retreat, "What do you mean by respect?".

As they describe what respect is, they talk about situations where an individual may be the only Indian in the classroom, with no one else who understands what he or she is thinking or feeling. At no point are they learning about who they are as Native American people, about the issues that they see at home, or about the issues that their community feels are important for them.

They feel that at no place in the school curriculum is there an opportunity for them to learn about their history and about themselves as modern people. At no place do they feel included in the content areas, especially in the area of history, where they are reading a very one-sided perspective. They keep wondering what was going on with their people and their tribal neighbors. They know that Native American people played a very integral part in history, but at no place in the content areas do they get that expression.

There is this assumption that Indian children know their own history. Well, Indian children learn the same way everybody else does, and if their family has an understanding of their history then it is passed down. If not, then the children learn in the traditional ways that all kids do, which is through their school experiences.

They will go very distinctly through the curriculum by subject areas and point out the "absence of." They point out how in English they don't read Indian authors or hear Indian poetry. The history is very blatant to them. They don't study Indian art, music, or dance, even though these are so much a part of the full American culture.

Q: What are some of the cultural differences that Native children face in the school setting.

A: The students pick up on how the teachers don't treat them in the same respect patterns that they are accustomed to in their homes. The differences are really very stark. Indian children are raised, even in our unhealthy homes, to be their own individuals. We are taught that each individual is created by the Creator with his or her own unique personality, that we all grow and change at our own pace, and that each of us has our own special gifts. That is the given philosophy.

Now given that that's our philosophy, we don't expect children to do things at any particular stage, time, or place. We allow children to learn and acquire things at their own comfort level and at their own pace. At the same time, Indian children are included in everything, whether at social gatherings, or when adults are working on art projects, for example. When children feel they are ready to do something, after having had all of these experiences with the family and the community, they just do them. No one

tells them, "Oh, you're not ready to do that yet because you're too young."

Another area of difference is in discipline. There is a tendency in the Indian community not to discipline in the same way that you see it carried out in mainstream culture. You don't see children sitting in corners or getting smacks - words or teasing are used. Expectations are explained, and then it's assumed the child will follow through.

When Indian children at school are disciplined by a teacher in a public setting, they view that as not being respectful, because in our community discipline is done very one-on-one. When discipline is done publicly, it's done in a way so as not to take away from the child's spirit, in a gentle, joking manner. For example, we'll give a child a nickname reflecting his or her behavior that can be used as a reminder in a non-humiliating way.

All adults in the Indian setting are considered extended family members, and we all assume a responsibility toward the children. Remember that our children are always included, so they constantly have the opportunity to see appropriate behavior modeled for them, for example at traditional spiritual ceremonies. There is no time in our culture where we take away someone's right to be themselves. There is no chastising, because we let our children experience the consequences of their own decisions.

Now, contrast this to the public schools, where children are told what they are to do, and if they don't do it they

are disciplined. From our perspective, there is no allowance for children in the school setting to learn from the choices they make, or to learn about the power of their own decisions in a setting where there are adults present to help them process their choices.

The students also talk about how there are few adults like them to look up to or to go to for help in their schools. Native American students in our urban areas suffer the greatest alienation. Their families live throughout our urban communities among people of all cultures, including Native Americans of different tribes. It's hard for Native American students and their families to develop support systems with individuals like themselves. This is important, because research shows that our ability to make good choices in life is founded in a strong self-identity.

For people of a culture, an understanding of self also comes through a strong understanding of ourselves as a cultural being. We must encourage individuals from the Native American communities to enter into not only education, but all careers. We need more individuals to work with students and families in diverse settings, who will also serve as good role models.

Even our most mainstream kids are affected. My daughter is one of the most "yuppie" Indian kids that I've ever met! She grew up an only child in a professional family with many friends in both the Native and non-Native communities. She feels very comfortable culturally, she identifies with being

Native American, and yet she crisises in the school setting. Although I've nurtured her and taught her as much as I can for her to have a bigger world view, our relationship, the parenting that she's used to and the approach to learning in our home are so directly in contrast with the school's approach, that it's hard for her to make the adjustment.

Q: What do you tell teachers about how to better meet the educational needs of Native American children?

A: It's important to remember that Indian children come with a real variety of connectedness to their Native culture, which is due to the impact of federal policy on Native people over generations. Some are very aware and expressive of their heritage and some are not, but they are still affected by it. I will never say the "do's and don'ts" with Indian kids because I've never met two alike. Not only do they have individual differences, but they are descended from diverse tribes. Michigan is a very multi-tribal state due to migration to factory jobs in the auto industry.

I tell teachers that you don't have to do anything special for Native Americans if you remember everything you know from the educational research about what's good for children. We know that it's best to put students into teams to review material, to give them prior knowledge and background, to give them responsibility for their own actions, and to involve them in the decision-making process. We also know that when children have numerous opportunities

to work in their most comfortable learning style, the are also more comfortable exploring alternative styles to learning. Since Native children tend to be very visual learners, they will be more successful in classrooms where teachers are providing instruction through a variety of modes. If classrooms were structured according to what we've learned from the research, then Indian children, even with all of their diversity, would be thriving in those environments.

Since some very distinct teaching methods have come out of the research, I remind teachers that as professionals we really do know what needs to go on for kids. Madeline Hunter, the effective schools movement, the new school restructuring - everyone's talking about kids being an integral part of decisions and decision-making. If these things were going on in more classrooms, then Indian youth would be feeling a sense of respect.

Q: What are the stereotypes that persist in non-Natives' concepts of Indians?

A: Most people have only learned about Native Americans in their school experience and only learned about us in this frozen time period of the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. That's all they know about us. They also mostly have a western perspective, not an eastern one, full of the John Wayne movie images of us all living in teepees and running around in loin cloths. Even the younger teachers coming out

grew up with a lot of Western movies and went through an educational setting that reinforced those film images of Native Americans. People still assume when they meet us that those Indians are who we are.

I can illustrate this through an experience that happened to me when I was teaching fifth grade. In February, when the kids and I got the typical "cabin fever," I used to spend several weeks teaching them about my history. When I announced that I am Native American, then the questions started flying. "Do you live in a teepee? Do you put feathers in your hair? When you get home do you put on your buckskins?", they asked. These were kids who knew me. They had seen me in the grocery store. They had seen me in professional clothes and in my jeans on field trips. Some of them had even been to my home, but they still had this frozen image of what a Native American should be based on the images they had been exposed to.

Teachers and other adults do the same thing. They assume that in 1993, Native Americans are still historic people. For this reason, when I go out into the field, I purposefully don't put on what people assume Indians must look like, not even my Native jewelry. When I speak to teachers I try to get them to understand that our culture has changed and grown. I drive an Oldsmobile and I love my microwave, and by saying this I mean that Natives participate in the modern culture that we're all living in today.

One of the exercises that I like to do with teachers is to have them visualize that perfect Indian pictured in their social studies textbook. When they describe the image, it's always the "noble savage," a stoic male dressed in full war regalia. Then I ask them simple questions to try to humanize that Indian for them. What kind of roles did this man have in the community? Was he a father? Do you think that when he came home from the hunt after several weeks absence, dressed with his hatchet and other trappings, that his children ran to hug him? Do you think this man always looks like this? When teachers answer these questions, even though we're talking historically, they begin to understand Natives as real human beings.

Q: What particular activities or resources do you recommend that can help teachers give their students a more accurate, culturally sensitive portrayal of Native Americans?

A: I'm concerned that educators forget the developmental considerations they must make as they introduce Native American people and culture through their classroom experiences, usually a "Native American Unit" taught during the month of November. In these units students are exposed to historic images of Native American people and culture frozen in time during the 1800's or earlier. However, elementary age (and younger) students have a limited understanding of the ideas associated with time.

Young children, Piaget might refer to them as being in the concrete developmental stage, generally place all ideas presented to them into the present tense, therefore making assumptions that the things they are exposed to are possible truths for today's world. Exposure to Native American people and culture from this historic perspective has contributed to many stereotypes about Native American people, stereotypes associated with an image that Native American people and their culture have remained frozen in the 1800's, or that Native American people are no longer around.

Developmental considerations have to impact the sequence of topics taught to students about Native American people and culture. Young students should be exposed to Native Americans and their culture in a contemporary context. In later years, as students develop an understanding of the ideas associated with time, they may be taught history and experiences which have impacted Native American people and their culture.

For lower elementary age children, choose books that talk about and show Native American children being themselves today. If you are using legends, make it clear to young students that these are stories that have been passed down in the culture for a very long time, that they are old stories being used in the present.

With middle school, junior high, and high school students, teachers can discuss questions that require abstract thought, such as, "Do you think that it's reasonable

that a culture of people living in 1993 would not want to take advantage of all of the currently available resources?". Well, of course not! But you can't have this kind of discussion with a kindergartner.

One of the key things is to get real Native people into the schools and classrooms who can chat with children. Storytellers, authors, artists, and just every day people can give students an accurate impression of real Natives as they are today. If you can't have real Indians present, especially with upper elementary students, then giving them the opportunity to see Indians on film is valuable.

One of my favorite video series for this purpose is the Spirit Bay Series (produced by Eric Jordan and Paul Stephens, Beacon Films, 1982-1986). The series includes over a dozen short fiction films, thirty minutes apiece and very usable in the classroom. I like them because they show real Native children doing real-kid things in the modern day. They are based in Native American culture and portray the Native children's perspectives and solutions to real problems. Through them you really get a feel for Indian children and culture. Spirit Bay Series is reviewed in an excellent guide for video selection, Native Americans on Film and Video, Volume II (by Elizabeth Weatherford and Emelia Seubert, Museum of the American Indian/Hyde Foundation, 1988).

There is a growing body of resources available for evaluating stereotypes and choosing non-stereotypical materials. The works of Arlene Hirschfelder are good. Her

book American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: a Reader and Bibliography (Scarecrow Press, 1982) exposes Native American stereotypes in children's literature. In the Winter, 1993, issue of Library Trends she analyzes a number of children's and young adult books for their portrayal of Native Americans (pp. 414-36). For early elementary educators, Naomi Caldwell-Wood, president of the American Indian Library Association, discusses picture books and Native Americans in a recent issue of the Wilson Library Bulletin (February, 1993, pp. 30-34, 112).

In the Multicultural Education Resource Guide, published by the Michigan State Board of Education in 1990, the chapter on Native Americans was written by Patricia Dwyer, then a Michigan State University graduate student. The narrative provides a summary of Michigan Indian history, facts about contemporary Michigan Indians, and some of the problems facing Natives today. It also includes a bibliography with over 125 references to mostly non-fiction sources about many aspects of Indian history, contemporary life, and culture.

Because of the growing body of noted Native American authors, such as Michael Dorris and James Welch, current bibliographies of Native American literature include references to contemporary works of fiction by Native authors that are appropriate for young adults. A book that features moving poems and essays by young adult Native Americans is Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans (selected by Arlene B. Hirschfelder and Beverly R. Singer, Scribner's

Sons, 1992). An excellent comprehensive guide for selecting non-stereotyped books for children and adolescents is Through Indian Eyes: the Native Experience in Books for Children, 2nd ed. (edited by Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, New Society, 1992).

Selecting culturally sensitive materials can also be achieved by just asking yourself some pretty simple questions. Does the piece that you are previewing feel like it's being respectful to the people who are being portrayed? Is it being presented in a way so that the reader doesn't draw conclusions about the way people "must" be? Is it done in a way that shows the diversity of the culture? Is it done in a way that shows how the people and the culture have changed and been impacted by other cultures?

A story about Native children in the 90's should be reflective of them in the present. Avoid materials that portray "generic" Indians, Indian people portrayed without reference to a specific tribe and time period. It should say in a piece that you are using for example, that this is an Ojibway family or boy, and that this is a historical piece about those times when the culture was living within its own traditional ways, even if it doesn't actually give a date.

Make sure that every Indian doesn't have feathers on or isn't pictured wearing skimpy clothes in a snow storm. The foundation of Indian culture is very common sense. Use a common sense approach, whether you're selecting materials

that present Native Americans or devising strategies to teach your Native American students.

Michigan's Native American people have expressed a hope that the opportunities for all students to learn more about Native American people - their culture, history, language, and arts - will not be isolated to that time of year when the "Native American Unit" is taught. Educators need to include Native American materials, resources, and information into many areas of the curriculum, rather than isolating the study of Native Americans to a seasonal unit.

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